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Forensic investigation of suicide cases in major Greek correctional facilities



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: According to Greek legislation the medico-legal investigation of deaths occurring in prisons is mandatory. Furthermore, in cases of suicide or of suspected suicide the contribution of medico-legal investigation is of grave importance. The current paper addresses the medico-legal investigation of suicide cases in Greek correctional facilities and aims to describe the current situation.

Materials & methods: Our study consists of the meticulous research in the data records of major Greek correctional facilities, for the time period 1999–2010. Official permission was obtained by the Hellenic Ministry of Justice, which provided us the access to the records. Data was also collected from the Piraeus Forensic Service, from the Department of Pathological Anatomy of the University of Athens and finally from our own records. Measures were taken to respect the anonymity of the cases. Data was collected for the social, penal, medical history as well as for the medico-legal investigation.

Results–conclusions: It appears that 85.7% of suicide cases were transferred to the Prisoner's Hospital ($p < 0.0001$), the forensic pathologist who conducted the PME did not perform scene investigation in none of the 70 suicide cases. In a total of 70 cases, histopathological examination, was requested only in 30 cases (42.9%). Hanging was the preferred method for those who committed suicide, followed by the poisoning due to psychoactive substances.

Understanding the mistakes made during the forensic investigation of suicide cases inside correctional facilities is necessary, in order to prevent them from occurring again in the future, by implementing appropriate new policies and guidelines.

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1. Introduction

Mortality data can provide valuable information on health issues that inmates bring to a jail system. By comparing mortality rates between the jail population and the general population, inmates' unique needs and health risks can be highlighted and thus more efficiently dealt with.¹

According to the Greek Correctional Code, all deaths of prisoners should be investigated by medico-legal examination.²

The above-mentioned provision of the Greek Legislation, is in contradiction with the widely accepted opinion that autopsy is performed primarily to identify unnatural and violent death.³

On the other hand, according to the National Association of Medical Examiners, medico-legal investigations aim to determine among others, the cause and the manner of death, of persons in custody.⁴

Furthermore, according to the Recommendation No. R (99) 3, of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe: “autopsies should be carried out in all obvious or suspected unnatural death, even when there is a delay between causative event and death”. The above-mentioned recommendation includes cases of homicide or suspected homicide, cases of violation of human rights, such as

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Table 1
Baseline characteristics of study by suicide (yes/no).

		Suicide		p-Value
		Yes	No	
		N	N	
		%	%	
Gender	Male	68	185	0.663
		26.9%	73.1%	
	Female	2	4	
		33.3%	66.7%	
Nationality	Eastern Europe	13	13	0.004
		50.0%	50.0%	
	Asia	9	10	
		47.4%	52.6%	
	Africa	1	7	
		12.5%	87.5%	
	Western Europe	4	6	
Profession	Greek	43	153	0.003
		21.9%	78.1%	
	Blue collar	51	124	
		29.1%	70.9%	
	White collar	8	53	
Family Status	Unemployed	11	12	<0.0001
		47.8%	52.2%	
	Single	36	48	
		42.9%	57.1%	
	Divorced	7	36	
		16.3%	83.7%	
	Married	25	83	
Children	Widow	23.1%	76.9%	0.008
		2	21	
	Yes	8.7%	91.3%	
		27	100	
	No	21.3%	78.7%	
		41	67	
	Illiterate	38.0%	62.0%	0.008
Education		8	17	
	<6 yrs	32.0%	68.0%	
		19	77	
	<9 yrs	19.8%	80.2%	
		19	37	
	<12 yrs	33.9%	66.1%	
		14	14	
Number of imprisonments	<14 yrs	50.0%	50.0%	0.065
		4	12	
	>14 yrs	25.0%	75.0%	
		2	21	
	1	8.7%	91.3%	
		60	157	
	2	27.6%	72.4%	
History of drug abuse		7	9	0.042
	Yes	43.8%	56.3%	
		3	23	
	No	11.5%	88.5%	
		18	28	
Receiving pharmaceutical treatment		39.1%	60.9%	<0.0001
	Yes	52	161	
		24.4%	75.6%	
	No	40.0%	60.0%	
Psychiatric disorder		134	55	0.037
	Yes	70.9%	29.1%	
		18	75	
	No	19.4%	80.6%	
		52	114	
		31.3%	68.7%	

suspicion of torture or any other form of ill treatment and finally cases of suicide or suspected suicide.⁵

According to the same Recommendation, “particularly in cases of homicide or suspicious death, medico-legal experts should be informed

Table 2
Age of first imprisonment, death by suicide.

		Suicide	N	Mean	95% CI	Min	Max	p-Value
Age of 1st imprisonment (yrs)	No	189	51.3	49.2	53.4	19.0	83.0	<0.0001
	Yes	70	34.0	31.4	36.7	15.0	68.0	
Age of death (yrs)	No	189	55.1	52.9	57.3	19.5	87.7	<0.0001
	Yes	70	35.8	33.2	38.4	15.2	68.6	
Months from imprisonment to death	No	189	43.1	32.5	53.6	0.00	565.0	0.009
	Yes	70	19.2	12.1	26.3	0.10	159.3	

without delay and, where appropriate, go immediately to the place where the body is found and have immediate access there”.

Furthermore, the above-mentioned Recommendation states that the medico-legal expert should be informed of all relevant circumstances relating to the death, ensure that photographs of the body are properly taken, record the body position and its relation to the state of clothing and to the distribution pattern of rigor mortis and hypostasis, examine and record the distribution and pattern of any blood stains on the body and at the scene, proceed to a preliminary examination of the body, note the ambient temperature and deep-rectal temperature of the body and finally make sure that the body is transported and stored in a secure and refrigerated location in an undisturbed state.

In line with the Greek Legislation, the necessity of the scene investigation by the forensic pathologist, is evaluated separately by the Authority demanding the post-mortem examination (PME).

2. Materials & methods

Our study consists of the meticulous research in the data records of major Greek correctional facilities, for the time period 1999–2010. Official permission was authorized by the Hellenic Ministry of Justice, giving us access to these restricted records. Data was also collected from the Piraeus Forensic Service, from the Department of Pathological Anatomy of the University of Athens and finally from our own records. Measures were taken to respect the anonymity of the cases. Data was collected for the social, penal, medical history as well as for the medico-legal investigation.

For purposes of statistical analysis, crimes were classified according to the Hellenic Penal Code,⁶ pharmaceutical agents were classified according to the anatomical therapeutic chemical (ATC)⁷ system and finally diseases were classified according to the International Classification of Diseases, (ICD-10).⁸

Table 3
Findings during PME, indicating prompt discovery of incident.

Findings indicating prompt discovery of incident	Suicide		p-Value
	Yes	No	
	N	N	
	%	%	
Transferred to Prisoner's Hospital	60	81	<0.0001
	85.7%	42.9%	
Transferred to civilian hospital	2	13	NS
	2.9%	6.9%	
Defibrillation marks	2	9	NS
	2.9%	4.8%	
EKG electrodes	3	14	NS
	4.3%	7.5%	
Needle punctures	10	66	0.002
	14.3%	35.3%	

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